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ABSTRACT

Reading aloud to children is the most important step towards making a child a reader. It exposes them to print and excites their curiosity through intriguing story lines. Parents play an enormous role in this aspect of reading development, because it begins long before a child is in school. In the beginning of school, teachers spend time assessing a child's reading ability. One way to assess phonemic awareness and further develop reading ability is through invented spelling in journal writing. Teachers must keep up the momentum of this development by allowing children plenty of time for reading and writing. Another way to involve students, is through the "Language Experience Approach" which enables children to write and read their own books. Explicit phonics instruction that emphasizes a relationship between letters is also necessary. One technique used to emphasize letters, word patterns, and spelling is a "Making Words Activity." Others include spelling tests (where sounds are exaggerated), rules instruction, and drill. It is evident that beginning readers learn to read in various ways, and therefore a combination of methods and techniques is the best approach. Teachers have to include phonemic awareness, authentic reading and writing and phonics instruction in order to reach all students. The goal is to have a classroom of proficient readers; qualities of proficient readers include: the ability to self-correct, make sense of a reading, predict what will happen, take risks, and challenge themselves. More specifically, a proficient reader will be able to decode unknown words, derive meaning from context, and comprehend main ideas (Sonoma County Reading Institute, 1997). (Contains seven references.) (CR)

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# Learning to Read:
# From Beginning to Proficient Readers

Erin Burke

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As the last straggler arrives, the children are nervously assembling themselves on the rug. Above them sits the teacher, who in a warm and nurturing voice, attempts to allay their fears. In doing this, she asks, " What do you think we will learn this year in the first grade?" Almost in unison, they respond, "To Read!" Some students continue the discussion by anxiously questioning, "When will we learn how to read?" or stating nervously, "I can't read." The teacher knows that behind each one of these voices is a parent who is afraid of the very same thing.

Of course, these fears are not unfounded, but are based in research: Students who do not learn to read in the first grade, quickly fall behind academically and subsequently, will struggle with low self esteem. According to Keith Stanovich and his "Matthew Effect", children who have difficulty reading tend to dislike reading, and therefore, don't read. Being unable to read affects every aspect of school and will inevitably lead to low academic achievement and limited career options (McPike, 1995). In a sense, a child's ability to read affects the rest of their life. However, the purpose of this research is not to instill fear and anxiety in our six year olds, but rather to encourage parents and teachers to be active and interested in teaching reading.

Reading aloud to children is the most important step towards making a child a reader. It exposes them to print and excites their curiosity through intriguing story lines. Parents play an enormous role in this aspect of reading development, because it begins long before a child is in school. It has been shown that children who are not read to or introduced to books, are less able to read. This comes down to the very basic idea that children do not learn what they are not taught (Allington, 1994). Along with reading aloud, in some families, it is common to see parents teaching their children rhymes and songs, which help to increase vocabulary and word play. In addition, magnetic letters on the refrigerator and alphabet songs introduce children to the idea that words are made of letters. In other families, parents may have less knowledge on reading research, less access to reading materials, or less time to spend reading or playing language games with their

children due to a heavy work schedule (McPike, 1995). Because of this dichotomy, some students are coming to school already reading, while others do not even know the alphabet. Consequently, teachers must provide a varied curriculum in order to support all students. But more importantly, schools should inform parents that exposing their children to books and reading aloud is crucial to their child's academic development.

In the beginning of school, teachers spend time assessing a child's reading ability. Teachers will recognize beginning readers because they are still developing their phonemic awareness, which is their understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds. Reading cannot occur without this connection(Griffith and Olson, 1992). If a child does not know the appropriate sound attached to each letter or a combination of letters, they may think a "b" makes the /v/ sound or a "t" makes the /s/ sound, and reading is rendered impossible. One way to introduce phonemic awareness is through introducing a letter and its sound, and then brainstorming different words that start with that letter. Afterwards activities are created to reinforce this letter/sound relationship. For instance, teachers will ask students to find words in a Big Book that start with the same letter. As a result of this emphasis, beginning readers focus on the initial letter in a word when trying to read. Another way to teach phonemic awareness is through rhyming words. A teacher will choose a common ending and have the class brainstorrm different words that rhyme. For example, if -at was introduced the students would think of rat, bat, cat, etc. Attention should be drawn to the fact that the first letter is the only one that changes(Beck and Juel, 1995). Both of these strategies, focus on the relationship between letters and sounds and prepare children for reading.

One way to assess phonemic awareness and further develop reading ability is through invented spelling in journal writing. A teacher is able to see how accurate a student is at transferring sounds into letters. For instance, a student may write the letter "W" for the whole word "We", which shows that the child is focusing on initial word sounds. Or, a

child may write "B" for the word "We," which shows that phonemic awareness has not yet developed (Griffith and Olson, 1992).

Once children have broadened their phonemic awareness and are beginning to read, a teacher must be able to keep up the momentum of this development. One way to do this is by allotting plenty of time for reading and writing. In short, children improve their reading skills by reading (Allington, 1994). Presently, most schools allow time for reading and writing, but this time is broken up into small time slots separated by recess, snack, and other special activities. There is no time for a child to really focus and get involved with their reading or writing. Large, uninterrupted blocks of time must be set aside to increase the effectiveness of reading instruction (Allington, 1994). Another way to encourage reading growth is by reading authentic, relevant, and interesting reading material out loud. These books tend to motivate students because they generate thoughtful discussion, new vocabulary, and are intriguing. Students, all of a sudden, will want to read for themselves (Allington, 1994). Another way to involve students, is through the Language Experience Approach, which enables the students to write and read their own books. Each child is motivated because they become a published author, read their books to the class, and donate their book to the classroom library (McPike, 1995). The focus of these teaching strategies is not only to inspire children to read, but also to instill the basic concept of reading for meaning.

Although these strategies are effective, they are not enough to create a classroom of successful readers. For instance, the children may love the books that a teacher reads aloud, but they are unable to read at that level. Unfortunately, the books at their reading level are far less interesting. Teachers need to provide students with the skills so their reading catches up with their understanding (Beck and Juel, 1995). It is known that beginning readers will focus on the initial consonant or a part of the word that they know. This type of reading is clearly not effective, because a child may see a "b" and immediately think "book," when the actual word was "banana" (Gunning, 1995). What we have learned from

this is that proficient readers look at each letter when they read. Of course, they do this quickly and subconsciously, but readers need to see every letter to ensure accuracy (Beck and Juel, 1995). Because of this, explicit phonics instruction that emphasizes a relationship between letters is necessary.

One technique used to emphasize letters, word patterns, and spelling is a Making Words Activity. In this activity, students are given five or six letters. The teacher chooses words made from these letters that follow a pattern. He/She reads these words out loud, exaggerating the sound, while giving clues like how many letters are in the word or how many letters change position from the previous word. This allows students to play with letters and sounds in a game-like way. Beginning readers may begin to recognize word patterns such as -at, -ow, or -an in their reading and associate them with the appropriate sounds (Cunningham and Cunningham, 1992). This activity enables a teacher to draw students attention to various consistencies in words and to introduce concepts of spelling in order to make them better readers.

There are other ways to teach phonics including spelling tests where the sounds are exaggerated, or even rules instruction and drill. Often phonics is taught while a student is reading or writing. For example, a student may come upon a word that is unfamiliar. The teacher will ask a series of questions such as: What is the first letter? What sound does that letter make? What sound does it end with? Can you sound out those letters? These questions force students to concentrate on the letters in trying to decode a word. All phonics instruction is useful; however, the most important aspect is that sound isolation, blending, and word patterns are introduced and that children are able to use this knowledge to decode words. For this reason, it is essential that what is taught during phonics is relevant and linked to the reading. If the students do not use what was taught in a phonics lesson, they will not remember the lesson (Beck and Juel, 1995). In addition, the books that are read individually should not contain too many potential phonics lessons. The books

should be simple and focused on a small number of skills. This allows children to practice what they have learned and to be successful (Beck and Juel, 1995).

It is evident that beginning readers learn to read in various ways, and therefore a combination of methods and techniques is the best approach. Teachers have to include phonemic awareness, authentic reading and writing, and phonics instruction in order to reach all students. The goal is to have a classroom of proficient readers. Qualities of proficient readers include the ability to self correct, make sense of a reading, predict what will happen, take risks, and challenge themselves. More specifically, a proficient reader will be able to decode unknown words, derive meaning from context, and comprehend main ideas (Sonoma County Reading Institute, 1997). These strategies are taught just like beginning reading strategies. For example, a teacher praises beginning readers when they self correct in order to reinforce this behavior. A teacher may also focus on prediction and ask questions like "What do you think will happen next?" and "Why?" Pointed questions are effective in showing students what is important. Once readers have become proficient, they move to another level of reading development where stories are analyzed or textbooks are introduced.

Overall, beginning and proficient readers are taught various strategies to further their reading development. For example, one beginning reader may have no difficulty decoding words, but may not understand the meaning of these words. In this situation, a teacher would focus on comprehension skills. In another case, a proficient reader may have trouble gaining meaning from textbooks. Hence, a teacher would emphasize pre-reading strategies like reading the summary first or focusing on the bold headings. Reading strategies are taught at every level. In short, reading is a continuum where development and growth never end and the teacher's role is to encourage this growth, and to guide children along the path towards academic achievement.

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